

But Hawkins is Home by Mileena

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Summary:

Heather was adjusting to a new life in Hawkins. She was finally settling in and maybe even daring to meet new people and open herself up a little. With some pushing from her cousin, Dustin that is.

1. Settling In?

What a year it had been. Heather had moved to Hawkins, Indiana a few years ago, after graduating high school. After some differences with her parents got a little out of hand, she thought a change of scenery would do her some good. When her aunt had offered to rent her an apartment over her garage, Heather thought it was the best idea to put some distance between herself and her religious fanatic parents. Seemed like a great idea. New town, some familiar faces brought some security, but still on her own and getting a start to responsibilities and life. And though he was younger than her, she absolutely adored her cousin Dustin and his band of nerdy friends.

After being basically disowned from her mom and dad, surely Hawkins would be the place for her to get a fresh start. And it had been. She got a job at the local gas station, the Fair Mart. She managed to scrape together enough money to pay for a slightly beaten-up orange 1975 Ford Maverick, which she dearly loved. Rusty and clunky, it was dependable. And still prided herself in the fact that she was never late on the rent that her Aunt Claudia had asked of her. Maybe this adulting thing was agreeing with Heather even more than she had hoped it would.

However, last year, Dustin and his friends had come to her for help. Not that Heather could offer a lot, but she was the closest thing to an adult that the kids could trust. Crazy things had been happening in Hawkins. For a small, out-of-the-way town, a lot of top-secret government things happened that basically half the town wasn't allowed to talk about after it was all said and done. At least not with anyone else, and never in public. Everything from interdimensional beings, to science experiments on a high security clearance level, to huge scale government cover ups had been going on. Her cousin and his friends had a new friend suddenly show up who was one of these science experiments. They had begged Heather to help hide this girl, Eleven. To help protect her. Though Heather had done what she could at the time, like giving the kids a refuge at her apartment when they needed one, she knew they had seen much more of the action, much more of the danger than she had. That broke her heart for them. Over the couple years she had stayed there, she had developed

almost a motherly protective bond with her cousin Dustin, all-the-while he was her best friend through most of her time there, even though she always realized the sadness on her part for having such a young bestie.

Though this seemed to have a fairly happy ending; the kids' lost friend Will was returned, the gate these hell-creatures came from seemed to have been closed, and all seemed right. This had come with costs. The kids' new friend Eleven seemed to have sacrificed herself to save them all, and the trauma left behind didn't seem like it was going to ever go away. Made worse by the fact that they couldn't share it with anyone not already involved, Heather had made sure she was available for her cousin and his friends to hang out and talk with any time they needed to. This was a lot on her, she could only imagine what the young kids must have been going through. Though her childhood didn't involve creatures from parallel universes who killed off people she knew, Heather did know what it was like being raised somewhere you didn't fit in, with no one to talk to. She couldn't go to her own parents, and even though Dustin's mom was the sweetest person ever, he couldn't involve her in what had happened since she didn't already know. But Heather did, and she wasn't going to let Dustin and his friends suffer in silence if she could help it.

Trying to bring them some normalcy is what had Heather up, working on Dustin's costume for Halloween that year. He and his friends were going to be the Ghost Busters. And she promised her aunt that she would help with it. Putting the finishing touches on it for the night, just as there was a knock at the door. As soon as she started to say "Come in", her cousin Dustin flung the door open and strolled inside. He had an orange paper in his hand, but his focus immediately fell to the costume laying on her bed.

"Woah! Is it finished?" he asked excitedly, his eyes lighting up. Heather nodded.

"Yep. Just in time for the big day. Try it on." she said. He grabbed it up and headed for the bathroom. Bursting back into the small main room of the apartment excitedly, Dustin hit a few ghostbuster-esque poses for her. Heather loved it. She really adored her cousin, from his tight curly brown hair to the teeth that hadn't quite grown in yet

because of some dental genetic disorder, to his overwhelmingly nerdy knowledge of everything from chemistry to My Little Ponies. She was so happy she could put a smile on his face. After they both examined her work and he gave it an enthusiastic thumbs up, Dustin changed back into his regular clothes and grabbed up the orange paper again.

“This is the real reason I came up to see you” he said holding it out to her. Heather reached for it questioningly, seeing a crudely drawn ghost sketched on what must be a photocopied flyer. “It’s a party invitation. A bunch of the older kids are going. There will be people, you know your age, too.” Dustin told her. Heather just laughed a little and shook her head.

“Ahhhh.. I don’t know” she ran the fingers of her right hand through the hairs near the back of her neck. “I mean I don’t know that many people-“

“Exactly. Not many your own age, you mean” Dustin interrupted. “Not that we don’t love hanging out with you. You’re literally the coolest cousin ever. But you need to get out there and meet people too. You do. And you need to have some fun. Seriously”

Raising a questioning brow to his parental sounding advice, she studied her cousin. She knew Dustin was being genuine. He was such a good kid.

“Don’t say no” he finished. “Just go!”

Heather pressed her lips together in thought. “I’ll think about it, how about that?” she asked, searching for a compromise. Nodding his head, Dustin sighed like he knew she had already decided she was not going to go.

“Ok but seriously. It’s time to go have some fun. Me and Mike and Lucas and Will are going Trick or Treating. We even met a new friend we wanna take with us. A Girl!” he said with a big grin.

“Oh really now?” It was her turn to question him. She walked the couple steps to her bed, which was the biggest piece of furniture in the small apartment. There was a pretty cozy overstuffed armchair that she had picked up at a second-hand store, and a little stand with

her small tv and VHS player on it. A nightstand by the bed and a couple barstools pulled up under a small counter she used as a table completed the furniture. There was a small stove and a refrigerator for appliances and that was enough for her. She was grateful she didn't have to go into the main house and wake anyone up so early in the morning to shower or make some breakfast. "Does this girl have a name?" Heather questioned with a grin, hoping this girl would help her change the subject.

"Mad Max! I mean, Maxine, but people call her Max, and she plays video games. She's amazing, and she goes by Mad Max!" Dustin gushed. Glad for the distraction, Heather let him go on and on about this new girl he obviously had a crush on. She thought he had forgotten the party when on his way out, he turned and said "Seriously. Go and have fun. Meet people. Meet boys" he grinned, closing the door behind him and descending the wooden stairs from her apartment.

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The next morning, Heather pulled in for her shift opening the Fair Mart. Parking up at the side of the building, she went to unlock the heavy glass swinging door, finding a familiar orange paper stuffed under it, which she picked up and studied thoughtfully again for a moment. Sighing, she set the tattered ghostie on the counter as she set about opening. Moving past the aisles of snacks, she went to the coffee station at the counter near the cold drink coolers, turning on the two coffee makers to start putting the coffee on. Moving toward the big brown metal security door near the end of the counter up front, she unlocked it and went to the back to count the money in the safe and brought out a drawer. Soon she unlocked the doors and went back behind the counter to begin her day. Today she was wearing an old, faded Aerosmith t shirt and some faded ripped jeans. Her make-up was dark as usual, but she had added a black lace choker necklace with a ghost on it to her attire today, to be in the spirit of Halloween.

The day started pretty much the same as always, the early factory workers stopping in for a fill up and a quick breakfast, the overnight factory workers grabbing some snack for the way home. Then shortly after came the high school crowd, rushing to school. Those that drove

usually stopped in for a can of Coke and a candy bar, or to grab some gas. One particularly nicely dressed guy stepped up to the counter and laid out a can of Coke and a pack of gum to buy. He smiled from under a shaggy mane of well-groomed brown hair and nodded to the crumpled flyer on the counter near her.

“Those are all around town huh. You going? I think everyone in town is planning to make an appearance” he said with a friendly grin. Heather gave him a small, shy smile and a little shrug.

“Ohh I don’t know-“ she said as he laid his money on the counter. He was opening his mouth to reply, when someone else shoved their way in beside him. It was another guy, roughly the same age, with long blonde curls and icy, blue eyes. He gave the first guy a cold grin.

“Whoops. Didn’t see ya there, Harrington” he said coolly, and before the first guy could answer, he turned to the counter and flashed Heather a big, warm smile. “Pack of Camels, sweetheart. If you’re done with Steve here” he said. Steve shot him an angry look, but he nodded to Heather and grabbed up his coke and gum.

“Maybe see ya there” Steve said cheerfully as he could before heading out the door. Heather gave a small wave and turned to grab the Camels for the guy at the counter. His cool blue gaze was still on her as she handed over the pack.

“Name’s Billy Hargrove, I’m new in town.. and yours is..?” he asked as she rang him up.

“Heather. And that’s eighty two cents please” she said. Still flashing her those pearly whites, Billy pulled out a crumpled dollar and handed it to her, motioning toward her.

“Nice shirt. Aerosmith, great band.”

“Thanks. You into rock?” she asked, with a small smile as she cashed him out and grabbed his change.

“Oh yeah, the classics and some new stuff. We’ll have to talk about it next time I stop in. Later cutie” he grinned, just as people were grumbling behind him about the wait. Pausing a moment, in spite of

herself, her brown eyes watching him walk out, she focused back on the line in front of her counter that had formed as the door swung shut. After that, the day went on as usual, people seemed to be bright and cheery and in the Halloween spirit in Hawkins. Heather loved it. Halloween was always her favourite holiday growing up, and that just extended into adulthood.

Around 10 o'clock, her slow time came when people were at work or school, or home from a long night. She started cleaning up and set a new pot of coffee going. She hadn't seen her most regular customer this morning, so she guessed he would be there soon. Almost predictably, the door chimed that a customer had arrived, and in walked the tall frame of the Chief of the Hawkins Police, Jim Hopper. Greeting him with a smile, Heather walked back to the counter and said "Just put a fresh pot on."

The man nodded with a smile of his own. "Guess I can wait around for the fresh stuff" he said, good naturedly. He set about putting some creamer and sugar into one of the foam gas station cups and set it next to the brewing pot. Noting the coffee wasn't yet done, he walked over toward the counter and leaned casually against it, flashing the girl a smile. "How's your Halloween starting off? Not too spooky, I hope?" Hopper smirked. Heather gave him a shy giggle and shook her head.

"No ghoulies or spooks yet. Just this little guy" she laughed, pointing at the flyer for the party. The chief turned the paper so he could read over it.

"Halloween party huh?" he kind of grinned, but his thought was interrupted by his radio going off. There was a problem at a local farm. Sighing with an apologetic turn of his mouth, Hopper pushed the paper toward her again. "Looks like a short visit today. Have fun at the party, but be careful out there" he added. He reached for the coffee before he left, pulling a dollar from his pocket. Heather waved her hand dismissively.

"On the house, Chief. Happy Halloween" she grinned.

"I like that. Nice touch" he smiled, pointing at her ghost necklace as he turned to go. "Happy Halloween!" he called as the door was

swinging shut behind him. Heather waved and felt her cheeks flush a bit as she watched him climb easily into his Police Chevy Blazer and take off quickly.

2. The Party

Heather found the rest of her shift rather uneventful. When the next girl got there for the afternoon shift just before 2, Heather gathered up her things and headed out to her old Ford Maverick. Tossing her jacket into the back seat that it was now a bit warm for, she hopped into the driver's seat and revved the engine. Loving the sound of that v-8 purring to life, she headed home, blaring The Ramones on the way. She climbed the steps leading to her little apartment over the garage and plopped on her bed, stretching out and trying to decide what to do that night.

Should she take the kids trick or treating? They were a bit old for that, but she heard the kids talking and knew Will's brother Jonathan was going to watch over him. Since he had been taken last year, everyone wanted to keep him safe. But Will hated being treated differently. Maybe she should go 'watch over' Dustin so it wasn't as weird for Will. She mulled it over. Maybe she could dress up, even. As she thought over what she could even throw together for a costume, her eyes settled on a crumpled orange flyer. The Halloween invitation that Dustin had brought up to her. Could she really just show up at some party? She didn't know anyone around town, which had been her cousin's reason why she should go. But, she wasn't really the mingling type.

Steve Harrington seemed like he was going to show up. He was nice whenever he stopped in at the Fair Mart. He had said pretty much everyone seemed to be planning to go. Would the Chief show up? No way. Of all the places to be, a party thrown by kids wasn't going to be one of them for Jim Hopper. She may not know him more than as a customer at the store, but she knew that. No, she couldn't do it. There was basically no one there she knew. She couldn't go. That was that. But she could take Dustin trick or treating with Will. Who knows, maybe patrolling the streets would be somewhere the cop would be.

She found an old, black dress and started cutting and sewing as fast as she could. By the time Dustin was home, she had just gotten done

with her outfit. She went down and had an early dinner with her aunt and cousin. As expected, Dustin wasn't thrilled when she said she wanted to tag along, but he seemed to agree when she told him why. "I even have a costume" she grinned. This news did put a smile on his face.

"Maybe we can convince you to go to the Halloween party after all" he said. She shook her head, but now her aunt's interest was peaked.

"A Halloween party? Oh honey, you should go. You should meet people and have some fun!" Claudia was all smiles, and Dustin nodded fervently next to her, scooping a fork full of meatloaf up to his mouth. Heather raised an eyebrow at him.

"I don't know.. I don't really feel comfortable around people.." she started. Claudia nodded in understanding.

"You are going to have to put yourself out there at some point, love. I'm not going to speak ill on your parents, but don't let anything they had to say ruin your spirit. You've always been the most outgoing, friendliest girl since I met you. Don't let that get taken away. Besides, it's the most magical night of the year. Who knows what could happen! Right, Dusty?" Claudia smiled at her son who was all grins now.

Heather sighed. "I'll think about it. Let me get Dustin started trick or treating at least. I know Will might feel better if Jonathan isn't the only one going along to chaperone." She said, and finished eating so she could go get her costume and make up on. She had decided to try and throw together Elvira, and just tease her own dark brown hair up. Putting some dark red lipstick on, she made sure the dress was ok one last time before heading out. She came out the door to find Dustin waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

"Holy shit! You need to go to the party tonight!" he said with a smile.

"Aww thanks, kid. Can you even tell it's Elvira?" she asked and he nodded. "I figured if nothing else, people might think Joan Jett and I can live with that" she shrugged.

“Who?” Dustin asked, but she just laughed and waved his question off. They got in her old muscle car and took off, heading to the kids’ meeting place. Dustin was out and running before she was even in park. She watched disappointment wash over their faces as she approached.

“Woah, nice to see you guys too! Happy Halloween” she smiled.

“Happy Halloween!” Will beamed from behind them. Alone. Heather looked back at the car he had gotten out from and Jonathan was sitting there watching Will walk up to meet his friends. She walked over to the car and leaned over.

“Hey I thought you were taking Will trick or treating” she said with a confused look. Jonathan gave her a shy smile and a shrug.

“He’s really upset about being baby sat. I mean, I get it. I told him to meet me back here at 9 and he could go alone for a few hours.”

“Ah well.. shit I was taking Dustin so Will didn’t feel out of place..”

“I mean.. you’re already dressed up.. wanna go to the Halloween party? I thought I’d drop by. Nancy- you know, a friend thought I should go meet people” Jonathan stammered through his words. Smirking as that sounded familiar, Heather shrugged.

“You know, why not. Ok, I’ll follow you?” she asked. She gave the kids the good news, got in her car and followed Jonathan to the Halloween party. Getting out, she walked over to him, as he was the only person she knew. “So, Nancy asked you to come? Nancy Wheeler?” she asked with a raised brow. Jonathan looked down.

“She’s a friend” he said. “By the way, Nice costume.. Joan Jett?” he asked. She grinned in response as they made their way to the house. As they got closer, the first person that Heather recognized was actually Billy Hargrove, the guy that introduced himself at the gas station that morning. Dressed in a leather jacket and jeans, she wasn’t sure what his costume was, but checking out his abs under the leather, she didn’t spend much time pondering it. He was doing a keg stand, at the moment. Letting her eyes linger for just a second, she rushed off following Jonathan inside.

She saw some familiar faces from the gas station, and jumped as a hand tapped her shoulder. Turning, she saw it was Steve Harrington. He smiled that friendly grin. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare ya" he said over the music. Jonathan spotted Nancy headed to the kitchen and took off in a bee line toward her. 'Real smooth, dude' Heather thought, but turned her attention back to Steve.

"No, sorry. Hey" she said, nervous and not knowing what to say. Steve ran his fingers through that dark mane of hair.

"Hey. Wow great costume" he said and she smiled, blushing under the make up.

"Thanks, I mean I just kinda threw it together last minute" she blushed.

"Pretty good for last minute!" he grinned. If nothing else he was really nice. She found him easy to talk to, even over the loud music. "So you came with Byers?" he asked.

"Jonathan? No. I mean, like I followed him here.. His brother and my cousin are trick or treating, so we both dropped them off.. you know.. and drove here. Separately"

"Oh ok, your cousin is friends with Nancy's brother Mike then?"

"Yeah, Dustin" Heather said. Then she realized the connection. "Oh are you and Nancy-?" she asked, feeling dumb and bashful at the same time.

"We are-were- I mean.." Steve seemed to stumble over his words in frustration. "Look, Heather, can I be honest.. " he looked toward the kitchen where Nancy was talking to Jonathan. "I don't know what we are" he said. She was opening her mouth to answer, when for the second time that day, Billy Hargrove bumped against Steve and grinned at Heather. She could tell the beer had hit him already.

"Well hey there, cutie" Billy said. "Flirtin' it up with King Steve, huh?" he asked. Before she could ask, Steve excused himself to go toward the kitchen, and Billy smirked. "Something I said?" Seconds later, a commotion erupted from the kitchen and Nancy stormed past,

her sweater dripping with punch, Steve close behind, looking upset. As the two hauled it upstairs, she watched them go, but her attention was grabbed back by Billy, who had also been watching the unhappy couple pass by. "Those two ain't gonna make it." Billy laughed and looked back over the girl in front of him. "Dig the outfit. Elvira's smokin" he said.

"Thanks. Hey, you got some good taste. Rock music, Elvira..." Heather smiled. She wasn't so sure what she thought about the guy, but he was cute, and he did have some good taste.

Billy smiled and drew a little closer, leaning one hand up on the door frame near her and leaned in to be heard better over the music. "Maybe you should let me take you out some time, Heather. What do ya say?" he asked. She smiled and felt that nervous rush that she had grown familiar with these days whenever anyone seemed to take some attention with her. However, that moment was broken by a slamming door and a very angry Steve Harrington coming down the stairs. He stopped by the two of them and it was his turn to interrupt.

"Hey Heather. I was wondering if you'd mind. I mean- you want to get out of here? Please?" he asked her. She could hear the emotion in his voice and she shot Billy an apologetic look. She could tell he wasn't thrilled at all, but he gave her his ever-cool grin and said "No problem, we'll pick this up later, cutie"

Steve grabbed her hand and they took off out of there. Passing Jonathan, she gave him a little wave, but she saw he had zeroed in on Steve grabbing her hand. "Let me drive, ok?" she asked, assuming he may have had a few drinks, and she didn't want to leave her precious car anyway. Thankfully, Steve agreed and got in, whistling at her ride.

"So.. what about.. Nancy?" she asked him as they drove off. Steve shook his head.

"Nope. That ship sailed. I said I really didn't know lately. Apparently, I'm just bullshit and our whole relationship has been bullshit" Steve told her.

"Oh shit. I'm sorry" she said, feeling a bit awkward as she drove.

Steve shook his head again.

“It wasn’t meant to be. It’s fine. I’m glad I know now” he said. “Honestly.” They ended up driving around Hawkins, just talking and hanging out. Steve was really funny. Heather felt bad that he had just gotten his heart stomped on. He was cute and seemed like such a nice guy. When it was time to figure out how Steve was getting home, she offered to drop him off, and he asked if she stayed with Dustin. She said she lived in the apartment over the garage and Steve smiled. “I don’t live that far, mind just dropping me there? The walk will do me good, and I can get my car tomorrow.”

As they pulled up, they sat in the car for a few minutes and she pointed out the flight of stairs by the garage, showing him where she actually lived. She couldn’t help it, she did like this guy. He walked her over to the steps and stood before her. “You know, Heather. It turned out to be a pretty nice Halloween night anyway” This made her blush but she did give him a nod.

“Yeah actually I’m kinda glad I went to the party after all.” She admitted.

“Maybe, I don’t know, maybe we could hang out again?” he asked her. Her eyes widened in surprise for a second and she nodded again.

“Yeah sure. That would be cool” she said. “I- uh.. do you wanna come up and write your number down or..?” Steve grinned and it was his turn to nod, and he followed her up the stairs. She let him into the small room, making a sweeping motion with her arms. “It’s not much, but it’s home” she said, softly. Silently she thanked her past self for tidying up before hand. She never expected anyone but Dustin would be up here with her anytime soon, but she was glad Steve Harrington wasn’t getting a good view of her dirty laundry laying out anywhere.

Steve surveyed the small room. If he was judging, she couldn’t see it on his face. “It’s cozy and home. It’s great to have a place of your own. I think it’s pretty cool. I have to admit to you now, I still live at my parents place.” Steve said, his brown eyes searching hers. Was he looking for her acceptance? That was a new concept to her. Jotting his number down on a pad of paper near the phone on her night

stand, he took her number too, and smiled sheepishly at her.

“I can just.. see myself out” he said softly. But she shook her head and walked with him down the stairs again. It was a really clear, bright night. “I’ll definitely call you. Sorry it wasn’t the best way to introduce myself tonight. But you’re really cool, Heather” he said.

“You’re pretty cool too” she grinned. The two stood in an awkward silence for a moment, facing each other and the next thing she knew, Steve had leaned down and given her a kiss. His lips were soft and his kiss lingered sweetly. As he pulled back, their eyes met again and they both grinned sheepishly this time, but Steve gave her one last quick peck and turned, walking away.

Her knees feeling a bit weak with the excitement that just rushed through her, Heather watched him walk down the street, when she realized that Dustin and Lucas had been walking up the drive from the other direction and had seen everything. She stared at them, they stared at her, mouths open. Finally, Dustin broke the silence.

“Heather! What the hell! When I said go meet guys.. I didn’t mean Steve Harrington!” he said, shaking his head. She shot him a look, but didn’t try to give him the “It isn’t like that” speech. She just turned and walked up to her apartment. She could hear the two boys say good bye and she knew they were giving silent ‘what-the-hell’ looks to each other.

Closing her door, she changed into an old RATT t shirt and snuggled into her bed. Her mind was racing. Billy asking her out, Steve kissing her.. but it wasn’t right. Was it really over with Nancy? And that wound was still so fresh for him. It wasn’t right. But his lips did feel good on hers... and at the back of her mind through all of it, was Jim Hopper. That sheepish feeling she got around him, the way he seemed to look at her. It was a lot. Why was her best friend a 13 year old boy who was also her cousin? Who could she even talk to about all this? Still.. it had been a good night. She fell asleep with her mind still racing.

3. Dinner n Dart?

The next day, Heather woke up in a foggy haze. Had last night even happened? At first, she wasn't sure if it was a dream or not. Had she really went out and been actually social? And left the party with one of the cutest guys there? Stretching sleepily, she ran her fingers through her tousled hair and sat up in bed. Rubbing blurry eyes, she turned on the lamp by her bed and saw Steve's number scribbled down on a paper he had left there.

It had been real. Shaking away the butterflies threatening to rush in, she yawned and stretched again, gathering up some clothes and heading to the shower so she could get in for her opening shift at the Fair Mart. Soon, she was freshly showered, dressed in a faded old Runaways tee and some acid washed jeans, and finishing her make up. Grabbing her jean jacket and keys, she headed out to her car and slid into the driver's seat. Engine purring to life, her newest cassette blaring out some Iron Maiden for her trip downtown.

Pulling into the parking lot and letting herself in, she relished hearing the click of the lock behind her. This was her favourite time of morning. Just her, alone in the store, getting ready for the day. She went through her routine, counting the safe and bringing a drawer out, straightening the candy bars and getting the coffee made. After the tidying up was done, she opened the doors just in time for the paper guy to bring in the bundles of papers for her. Ralph smiled and clipped the straps for her before heading out.

As she was stacking the papers, the door chimed with her first customer of the morning. She found herself jumping to see if it was in fact Steve. But no, it was just the influx of first shift workers coming for their morning coffees. Soon through the early crowd, came an unexpected visitor. Her cousin Dustin had ridden his bike out of the way to stop in before school.

"Hey kiddo. You need something? Everything ok?" she asked.

"Yeah. Yeah. I mean.. are you gonna be home tonight?" he asked hesitantly, like he was picking his words carefully. Heather raised a brow questioningly and tilted her head slightly.

“Yeaahhh.. why wouldn’t I be?” she asked.

“Good. I mean- I have something to show you. I just wanted to make sure you won’t be on a date with Steve Harrington” Dustin grinned. Heather rolled her eyes at her cousin.

“We’re not dating” she told him.

“You can tell your favourite cousin all about it later. Just make sure you’re home!” Dustin said. Heaving his backpack up onto his shoulder, he started for the door.

“Wait, what do you have to show me?” she asked, curious what he was being so mysterious about.

“You’ll see later! Honest! I gotta go, you don’t want me to be late for school! Ok byeeee!” Dustin said enthusiastically as he kept heading to the door. Rushing out, he almost ran into the next customer coming in, who happened to be Billy Hargrove. He was looking a little haggard, Heather noted. She figured he had stayed long after she had left the party last night.

“Morning, sunshine” she teased. “How was the party?” Billy still managed a fairly charming smile, in spite of his obvious state of hang over. His blue eyes dropped more than usual, but he still held his gaze on her attentively.

“Would have been better if Elvira had hung around” he grinned. She laughed and added a pack of aspirin to his pack of camels. “You left with Harrington huh?” he added, tossing a couple bills on the counter.

“He needed someone to talk to” she said. Billy nodded and pocketed the cigarettes and aspirins.

“I bet he did. You ever need someone to talk to, you should give me a chance. I’m a great listener. Probably better than Harrington at that, too” he smirked and gave her a wink. “See ya around, Elvira. Think about it.” She found herself watching him go again, lost in thought for a minute before snapping out of it. She had tried to keep herself busy all morning, but had caught herself watching the doors a few

times to see if Steve did stop in. When it was well past the school crowd time, she sighed and shook her head. Scolding herself.

She knew better than to fall for a pretty face. She knew he was recently very involved, and recently very hurt. Did she really want to be a rebound anyway? No. That nagging feeling wasn't JUST the chief of police on her mind, but that feeling of being a 'next best thing' and she had known it all night but not wanted to admit it. The chiming door made her jump, lost in her thoughts. Looking over to the door, she saw Chief Hopper had arrived a little earlier than usual today.

"Oh!" she let out a small exclamation, hurrying toward the coffee station. "I didn't expect you yet, let me start some fresh if you have time?"

"I think I can make some time" he smiled, and walked toward the counter. She gave him a bashful grin as she set about setting the coffee up to brew. Momentarily, she forgot what she had been scolding herself about. Settling an elbow against the countertop, he studied her a moment. "So how was the big Halloween party?" he asked casually. Heather shrugged a little as she made her way behind the counter, across from him.

"I didn't really stay long." She said, not really knowing what else to say.

"No? Nothing catch your interest?" Hopper asked, not expecting an answer. "What did you dress as?" She laughed and shook her head, bringing a grin to his lips. "What? Come on, don't want to tell me? Can I guess?" Crossing her arms, she gave him a bashful smirk.

"Ok, three guesses." She could feel her cheeks growing warm already and this seemed to put a twinkle in the man's blue eyes. His lips pursed in thought and he stroked his beard.

"Gene Simmons?" he asked with a playful grin. This made her giggle and shake her head.

"No, but you think I could pull it off?" she teased, making devil horns with one hand and sticking her tongue out in her best impression.

“Oh I’m sure.. hmm not Gene Simmons... then maybe Princess Leia?” he studied her for her reaction.

“No, but I’m flattered. I’d love to be a princess for a night” she grinned. Hopper chuckled again and leaned down, cupping his chin in his hand. “One guess left” Heather smiled.

“Vampira” Hopper said, with little hesitation. Her mouth formed a little ‘o’ for a second and she shook her head.

“Nope, but that was so close I’ll tell you anyway. Elvira” she said, blushing a bit more than before.

“Elvira. Queen of Darkness, right? That musta been something to see” Hopper chuckled, noting the redness of the girls face.

“Not really. I mean I literally decided last minute.. kinda just threw it together.. Half the people thought I was Joan Jett I’m pretty sure” she mumbled in embarrassment.

“Runaways?” he asked, pointing to her faded old t shirt, getting an approving nod from the girl. A silence settled in between them, and Hopper turned to fill his cup, now that the coffee had finished brewing. Taking a deep breath, he turned back toward the counter and cleared his throat. “So uh, Heather. I was thinking... I mean I was wondering. Maybe you’d let me take you out to dinner?” he asked, his eyes starting out on her, but falling to the counter to stir his coffee absently. When she didn’t reply right away, he looked back up to see the surprised look on her face.

“Out to dinner?” she repeated. “Like a date?” If she held back butterflies earlier, they were back in full force now. And they weren’t being held at bay again. Her big brown eyes looked for a sign from him that she had misunderstood. But Hopper just gave her an awkward smirk.

“I mean, if you want it to be... yeah.” He nodded in confirmation. “Like, a date. I just figured, you know, I’ve been coming here every morning for a year now and getting coffee from you and maybe you’d like to ... I don’t know, have dinner” he answered.

“Yes!” she answered before she even gave herself time to think about any kind of smooth retort. She would figure out how to deal with the situation with Steve later, if he even wanted to talk to her again. Hopper’s awkward smile turned into a bigger grin, and he nodded.

“Enzo’s tonight?” he asked. Biting her lip, Heather nodded. “Can I pick you up? Maybe around eight?”

“That would be awesome!” she grinned. After telling him where she lived, and exchanging phone numbers, he nodded and told her he was familiar with Dustin. She wondered how, but she didn’t ask, her mind was reeling at the moment.

“Alright, yeah. I’m glad. I’ll see you at eight then.” Jim said with a smile. He pushed a dollar across the counter and walked out with a grin before she could tell him it was on the house today. Mustering a wave goodbye as the door swung shut, she sank back onto the barstool that sat behind the counter and slumped forward onto the counter for a second. Was this really happening? First Steve and now Hopper?

~*~

The day passed with no word or sign from Steve. Heather had been left wondering what was up, but with the recent interest of Hopper, and the realistic fact that Steve might have realized he just made a wrong turn, Heather decided calling him would be a bad move. She needed to focus on tonight. She wanted to focus on tonight. Hadn’t she been getting random flutterings when Hopper stopped by the station each morning for the last year? Hadn’t she found herself speculating about him often, suspecting he could be flirting from time to time? If she didn’t talk to someone soon, she was going to explode.

Maybe her Aunt Claudia could offer some advice later. She had been the closest thing Heather had known to a mother since long before she had left home to move to Hawkins. Maybe Joyce Byers could offer some insight to Hopper. They had been friends, and he seemed to visit her for advice. At least Heather had seen him leaving her

place when she went to go pick up Dustin. But she knew Joyce was dating that guy down at Radio Shack. It was a small town, everyone knew everyone's business to some degree. For now, she passed the day waiting on customers until the next girl came in to take over, and raced home as soon as she could.

She knew she had to see what Dustin was so excited about before anything, so she spent the time waiting for him to get home from school getting her outfit ready for that night. Heather had never been to Enzo's before, but she knew it was fancy. Much fancier than anywhere she had been to before. She found a long black skirt and a long-sleeved black velvet top that buttoned from the neck all the way down. She held both up in front of a mirror and thought with the right jewelry, she could look very Stevie Nicks in this for sure. Noting that still no call from Steve came by the time Dustin got home which was much later in than usual, she went downstairs to meet him.

Dustin looked pretty suspicious as he looked around checking for Claudia before ushering Heather quickly into the house and toward his room. Once they got there, he closed the door behind him, and set his bag down gently.

"Ok, Heather. Seriously. You are by far the coolest cousin ever. I know we've shared a lot with you.. and.. I really need to share something else.. but. BUT. I NEED you to promise me you'll keep this a secret" Dustin begged her.

"Who am I gonna tell?" she laughed.

"I'm serious. Like one hundred percent serious! Not a word to anyone. Not to mom, not to your new boyfriend"

"Oh my God, Steve is NOT-" but Dustin moved a hand up to silence her.

"Please promise me. You won't regret this and it's SO COOL" Dustin exclaimed, his eyes shining with excitement. Heather nodded and waited silently for him to continue. Slowly, Dustin reached into his bag and produced the trap from his ghostbusters costume. She watched on as he moved over to his turtle tank, which she just

noticed was now vacant, and turned it over, spilling something into the bottom of the tank.

Before Dustin even turned toward her, she had crept closer, peering into the tank. What was in front of her was something she had never seen before. Small, slimy looking, dark green. It looked like a fat slug at first. She couldn't take her eyes off of it.

"Isn't he so cool?" Dustin grinned, excitement in his voice. Heather's mouth dropped open. All she could do was stare at the tiny creature. The skin was smooth and glossy, it was so alien looking. A sudden fear swept through her. Turning to Dustin, she grabbed his shoulders lightly to get his attention.

"Dustin, you don't think that--"

"No. There's no way. El closed the gate. This has GOT to be a new species. It has to be! I need to go do some research but I really wanted you to see him! I named him Dart!" he exclaimed. There was none of the doubt in his voice that Heather felt. She turned back to the tank and watched the little creature seem to raise its head toward the sound of their voices. Dustin grabbed out a leftover candy bar from Halloween and carefully lowered it into the tank in front of him.

"He likes Three Musketeers!" he exclaimed, grinning widely as he watched 'Dart' devour the candy. Afterward, the little guy almost seemed to hum, or purr. Heather had to admit, it was kinda cute. "You wanna hold him?" Dustin asked. She did want to. Checking the clock, it said seven o'clock.

"I do. But I have to do it later. I have to get ready. Are you absolutely sure there's no chance that Dart could be--"

"No. There's no way! Look, he loves me already. He likes you too! What are you getting ready for, Steve Harrington?" Dustin asked, making kissing noises. Heather playfully punches his arm.

"No. But I do have a date." She said. "Look. Dart is really amazing. And I won't tell anyone. For now. But we need to watch him. Ok, Dustin? Promise me. If he does anything. Anything weird, or scary..

promise me you'll let me know."

"I'll tell you" Dustin looked a bit defeated, but added "But he won't" Heather held out her pinky for him to make a pinky promise. Just before he was about to take it, he pulled back hesitantly.

"Not Steve? Then who?" he asked curiously.

"Jim Hopper" she said non-chalantly, still holding out her pinky. Dustin did take her pinky and promise.

"The chief? Why?" he asked as he screwed his face up at the thought. "Seriously Heather. When I said meet guys..." she laughed and ruffled his curly mop of hair and turned to make her exit. She had just enough time to get ready for her big date, she hoped.

~*~

A few minutes before eight, Heather had surprised even herself. She had managed to get showered, blow dry her hair, get a bit of curl in it and tease it into some sort of style so she didn't feel so plain. Her outfit was on, and she had found several silver bangle bracelets and a long string of beads, wooden and black onyx to match her long sleeved black velvet shirt and the long, lacy black skirt. She stepped back after finishing up her trademark dark make up and studied herself. Very gypsy Stevie Nicks, but she thought she could pull the look off decently. She shoved some essentials into a small black handbag that she planned to take with her, just as she heard the familiar roaring engine of the Chevy Blazer coming to a stop in the street out front.

Scrambling for one last look in the mirror, and pausing to add a quick dab of her favourite sweet perfume near the nape of her neck and her wrists, she was just grabbing up a black suede jacket when there was a knock at the door. She froze for a brief second, her heart thundering in her chest. She actually didn't get a lot of guests, and the sound of knocking in general was pretty foreign these days.

Taking a nervous, shaking breath, she moved to the door and peeked out, already knowing who was on the other side. Opening the door, she saw Jim Hopper standing there. His tall frame filling her doorway, he was dressed in a nice brown plaid button-down shirt, and blue jeans. A brown leather jacket accompanying the outfit. A grin spread over his face as his gaze looked her over. Momentarily biting his lower lip before speaking, he took a deep breath and almost seemed nervous himself. "Wow. You look.." he trailed off with an appreciative smile, before collecting himself again. "Great. You look really great, Heather" he said, smiling as he noticed the red blush this caused her.

"Thank you. You clean up pretty great yourself" Heather smiled back at him, a gleam in her brown eyes. He grinned and held his arm for her, and she walked out with him. He held the truck door open for her and closed it for her, and she looked up just in time to catch Dustin grinning from the living room window. As Jim settled in next to her, all her attention was for him. The butterflies were back again, and she had a feeling they were there to stay for the evening.

~*~

Enzo's was even nicer than she had imagined. As Jim opened the door for her, she walked into a beautifully decorated room. Everything was trimmed in beautiful, polished oak with gold accent. Mirrors and baubles adorned the walls, the bar even around the ceiling where large crystal chandeliers hung, creating a twinkling ambiance in the dimmed room. Heather's breath caught as she looked around, and she suddenly felt very small. She found herself wishing she could shrink even smaller than she felt, and was afraid people were about to tell her she really didn't belong here.

Suddenly, a gentle but heavy hand on her shoulder brought her back to reality. She was right where she belonged, on Hopper's arm. Soon enough they were seated, and the waiter asked for their drink order. She let Jim order a white wine for her and he ordered a scotch for himself.

Waiting for the drinks to come, she took in the scenery around her.

Smiling, she caught Hopper looking at her with a twinkle in his own eye.

“You really do look lovely tonight, Heather” he said. “I mean it’s not that you don’t usually. But it’s a change from your Quiet Riot tee shirts” Hopper said with a grin. Heather giggled a little and took the glass of wine that the waiter brought over.

“You have your uniform and I have mine, Chief Hopper” she grinned. This brought a chuckle to Hopper as well.

“You know, I honestly thought you were one of the kids from Hawkins High when I first met you. I was pretty relieved to find out you were older than that” he confessed, his gaze suddenly lost in his drink that he kept rubbing his fingertips against. Heather shook her head.

“Nope, actually I moved here from Williamsport, a few towns over. I graduated there, and my aunt Claudia offered to rent me the apartment.. and here I am” she said cheerfully. Hopper nodded.

“Ok, I gotcha. Nice little town. Well we’re happy to have you” he grinned.

“Very happy to be here” she told him, giving him a big grin. Her dark eyes sparkled. The butterflies were doing a number tonight. Hopper was older than her. Pretty much the opposite of Steve. He was gruff, he was so handsome to her, but not the way Steve was. He most likely didn’t spend time in front of his mirror applying product to his hair. He was a ‘man’s man’, as her dad probably would have called him. His deep voice sent a shiver down her spine, in a good way. The first time he had came and leaned that tall frame against the counter and made small talk with her at the Fair Mart, she had really noticed it. She noticed the way his lip twitched in a smile under his mustache if she managed to say something witty. And she liked it.

Dinner progressed, and they never seemed to run out of things to talk about. Amongst his other qualities, Hopper was great at conversation. She wasn’t sure if it was his doing or the wine, but she felt herself unwinding and enjoying the night immensely. They talked about how he used to be a cop in New York City, and how he likes the quieter

life here in Hawkins. They talked about Dustin and the kids he hung out with.

Of course that was how Hopper knew Dustin. Will had been missing last year. Well, there was a lot more to that story but she really wasn't sure if Hopper knew what really happened to Will. So she kept her mouth quiet on that subject and moved topics when he did. It seemed like hardly any time had passed, but before they realized it, the waiter had brought their bill because the restaurant would be closing soon.

"Wow its that late already? I honestly can't think of the last time I lost track of time like that" Hopper told her as he slid the check out from under her hand before she could take it. Soon he was walking her back to his truck and starting the drive back to her house. She found herself wishing that trip home would never end. But of course, it did. Hopper got out and walked with her up the wooden steps to her apartment. Standing at the door, she turned to face him.

"I had a great time tonight, Heather" Jim told her, his blue gaze fixed on her. She felt a warmth spread over her cheeks and she knew she was blushing, but she was also grinning. Nodding, unable to wipe the grin from her face.

"It was a really wonderful night" she agreed. "I'm so glad you asked me out"

"You are?" he sounded almost surprised. "So.. would you be opposed to me asking you out again sometime?"

If it was possible for her grin to get bigger, it surely must have. "I think I'd like that" she said. His turn to grin now.

"Am I keeping you out too late? Do you work tomorrow morning?" he asked, softly.

"I work, but it's ok. I think I'll manage" she smiled. Hoppers lips twitched into a smile under his mustache and he took a deep breath, like he didn't want to end the night either, but knew he should.

"I know I should let you get some rest then. We both have early days.

I'll see you tomorrow?" She nodded. "Well. Guess this is good night then." He smiled. Before she could answer, he leaned down and his lips met hers with a strong kiss. Biting her lip, she looked up at him and he softly added "Goodnight Heather"

"Goodnight, Jim" she smiled, and he turned to go down the steps, as she opened her door. Not daring to look back, or she knew she would stall some more and look for some excuse to keep him there, she went inside and closed her door, leaning against it and sinking to the floor, a big, dopey grin plastered on her face.

4. See, He Likes You!

The next morning passed with her in a sleepy, yet day dreamy haze. She greeted customers, always looking behind them as if looking out for someone else. Was Steve planning to ever come address Halloween night? The kiss? Was he avoiding her? Surely he wasn't waiting on her to call him.

The school crowd came and went for a second day and still no Steve Harrington. But earlier than usual, a familiar Blazer came roaring into the station. Jim stepped out, dressed once more in his brown uniform. She knew her face lit up when he walked through the door, and was glad to see a smile spread across his face too. His long strides took him right to the counter instead of the coffee this morning and she happily took the change.

"Good morning, beautiful. I see you're back in uniform, too" he smirked good-naturedly and motioned to her old, faded Motor Head tee shirt. She chuckled and nodded.

"Dressed for success" she said sarcastically.

"Don't sell yourself short. I'd never consider another cuppa Joe in town anymore" Hopper grinned. He set her small black clutch purse down on the countertop. "You left this in my truck, but I figured I would bring it by this morning."

"Oh! Thanks, I can't believe I forgot that" she said, feeling shy again, all of a sudden. She smiled up at him, though her cheeks burned with a blush. "It was a really great night."

"It was. I can't lie, I'm looking forward to round two." Hopper told her.

"Me too. I really am" she smiled.

He leaned down, his elbow on the countertop. His chin in his cupped hand so he could just look up at her. "Would it be bold of me to go for next Saturday night? I have it on good authority that the theatre downtown is gonna be playing that new horror movie people are

raving about, Elm Street, if you like horror movies” Hopper raised a brow in question. “We could grab some dinner and see a movie?”

“Uhhh yeah! That sounds great!” she said excitedly. The smile on Hopper’s face melted her.

“Well it’s a date then. Can I pick you up again? Around six?” he asked.

“Six next Saturday. Sounds perfect” she agreed, knowing that grin wasn’t coming off her face for a while. Before Hopper could answer, his radio went off and he was being called away again. Shooting her an apologetic look, he rushed to the door calling out “See you soon, rocker girl”

~*~

She sped home after work that day, Twisted Sister blaring on her speakers. Her old car roaring down the side roads until she got home. Pulling into the driveway, past the garage near the steps to her apartment, she was about to head up to her place when Dustin poked his head out from his house and called her over.

She walked up the drive, curiously. “Hey kiddo. What’s up?” she asked. Dustin looked around suspiciously, and she knew from his behaviour it had to be about Dart. Her pace quickened with his, as she followed him through the house to his room. Dustin had a blanket over the aquarium, and he peeked underneath before pulling the blanket down.

Heather let out a small, surprised squeak. Dart had nearly doubled in size and now had little legs! Her face giving away the shock she felt. She knelt down and studied the small creature.

“Dustin! He’s bigger! Already? How?” she asked. But she couldn’t take her eyes off of Dart. She took the candy Dustin unwrapped, and placed it next to him herself this time. Listening as Dustin explained he had to have molted and shed his skin already, Heather reached in and gently stroked the creatures back as he devoured the candy bar.

“Aww he needs that extra food to grow, don’t you little guy?” she cooed. “Dustin, he’s so cute! Oh! Listen! I think he likes this!” she said with excitement as she stroked his back and the creature seemed to hum again. Dustin dropped in another Three Musketeer bar and Dart even hesitated so Heather could keep petting him for a second.

“See, he definitely likes you!” Dustin said happily. “And he wouldn’t hurt us!” he added. Explaining that his friends all thought that Dart was one of the creatures, like Heather had first suspected, from the Upside Down. They wanted him to kill Dart, or turn him over to someone. Heather frowned.

“But he hasn’t done anything yet, right? He hasn’t acted aggressive or anything?” she asked to be sure. She already felt compelled to protect this adorable little guy. Pulling her hand back out so he could eat, she covered the tank again as Dustin swore up and down that Dart hadn’t done anything suspicious yet at all. “Make sure you watch him close. And remember your promise. You tell me if he does anything. I mean it. If he growls at you, I wanna know” she warned him. As Dustin nodded in agreement, she smiled “But he is adorable.”

As they were leaving Dustin’s room, he grinned and asked “So how was your date last night?” She was about to answer when a voice made both of them jump.

“A date? Oh dear, I thought I heard a car pull in late. Care to tell your nosey aunt, too?” Neither of them knew that Claudia, Dustin’s mom had came home while they were looking over Dart. Heather grinned as Claudia continued “I was about to make a cup of hot apple cider. You can catch me up if you feel like chatting” Agreeing eagerly, she couldn’t wait to tell someone about everything going on in her love life. As she sat with her aunt at the kitchen table, she smelled the hot drink, and took a nice long sip, reveling in how long it had been. Right now, this was the most delicious thing she could think of.

She started out telling Claudia about seeing Hopper around the gas station months before he had asked her out. Claudia grinned. “Ooh Chief Hopper! He’s a bit older than you, sweetie. But honestly age is just a number anyway, right?” she smiled. Heather hadn’t even considered any age difference between them.

"Honestly, Aunt Claudia. I never even stopped to think about that. It's never felt like much of a difference." She said, a grin making its way back to her face. Claudia chuckled.

"I take it the date went well?" she asked, taking a sip of her cider. Heather nodded and started gushing about how great the night was. How she had never been anywhere as fancy as Enzo's before and how Hopper had been a gentleman, walking her back to her door. She told her about him asking her out again and how she couldn't wait to go. "I'm so glad, honey. You deserve to be happy. And treated well. You do. Take it slow and don't rush, you have so much time" she said with a grin. Heather loved her aunt so much. She had become more of a mother figure to her than her own mom had been through the later years as she grew up. She was so grateful to Claudia and felt like the woman saved her by letting her come live here in Hawkins with her. And she was glad her aunt seemed to approve of her date with Jim.

A knock at the door interrupted their chat and Dustin raced to answer it. "Uhhh.. Heather... it's your not boyfriend" he announced and swung the door open, revealing Steve Harrington standing on the doorstep. Heather's jaw dropped and she looked over to Claudia, who stayed silent, but she could see the curiosity on her aunt's face. Heather felt her cheeks flush as she stood and went to the door. Steve was dressed in jeans, a green t shirt and a dark blue jacket. He was holding a small bouquet of flowers. Orange and yellow daisies. Heather's eyes wide, she didn't know what to say, so they stood in silence for a second before Steve found some words.

"Hey Heather. You uh.. you weren't home so I thought I'd check here when I saw your car" he started. His empty hand raised to run his fingers through the hair at the back of his head. "So uh. Hey. Can we uh.. can we talk?" he asked. She nodded slowly and looked back at her aunt apologetically. Claudia just waved and smiled.

Walking out to the doorstep with him, she closed the door behind her. "Did you uh, did you want to come up?" she asked, motioning toward the steps up to her apartment.

"I mean if you don't hate me, yeah. And these, uh, these are for you" he handed the flowers to her. Heather smiled. The flowers were

really pretty. As they walked up the stairs, she opened the door and let him in. Grabbing a glass, she filled it with water and put the flowers inside.

“Thank you. F-for the flowers” she said softly. “They’re really nice”

“Look Heather. I’m sorry I bailed and didn’t call after the party. It wasn’t cool. I just.. I don’t know. I’ve been through a lot with Nancy and I guess I felt I owed it to her to talk to her after she sobered up. But I-I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I mean, I didn’t kiss you because I was hurting. I kissed you because I wanted to. And I hope you wanted me to. Things with Nancy, they’re done. They are..” Steve gushed.

“I definitely wanted you to.” Heather said, smiling at him. “But Steve, that’s a lot. And I don’t want to be some rebound girl. You must be hurting. And it’s ok to be.”

“No. No, you aren’t some rebound girl. Heather, you’re not. Look. I was a class A jerk for not calling you the next day. Or.. the next. Or today. But that’s why I’m here now. I don’t want this really cool girl that I just met to hate me and walk out of my life.” Steve sighed. “And ...if I keep acting like a grade A asshole, some other guy is gonna swoop in and ask you out before I can. Like Jonathan Byers or-“

“Or Chief Hopper?” Heather asked.

“Well, I was gonna say Billy Hargrove. I mean... I guess Hopper could try if you were into old dudes” Steve laughed lightly.

“He asked me out, Steve”

“He- he what?” Steve asked. Scoffing lightly at the irony before he continued “I mean you didn’t say yes though, right?”

“I did.. he took me to dinner last night. And we’re going to the movies next week.”

“Oh.” Steve said quietly. Heather felt her heart sink a little. She wasn’t at all ashamed of dating Jim. But she really did like Steve and she knew he had just been hurt and put himself out there again. “I

mean.. that's great. Really. Chief's a great guy" Steve said, turning toward the door. Heather's heart dropped even more. But then, Steve stopped and turned back to her. "You know. I can treat you good. I mean you guys aren't something official right? Let me take you out" Steve said. She studied his face, but he was dead serious. "Come on, let me take you out. We can grab a pizza and then go watch the sunset over the lake. You'll have fun. And you know, if you wanna get serious with Hop, I get it. I mean, if you wanna get serious with me, I'd like that." He added with a smile. He did have a really great smile.

Heather studied him for a second, thinking. She was awash with emotions. She really liked Steve. She had been confused and hurt that he didn't call, even thought she tried to be understanding. She really liked Jim. And Jim had carried through and even asked her out again. But Steve was right. Nothing was serious... yet.

"I mean, it does sound nice.." she started, bringing a smile to Steve's face. "But I am still going to the movies with Jim" she had to be truthful with him. Her mind was made up, and he deserved that. Steve nodded.

"I wouldn't expect less" he said, solemnly. She bit her lower lip in contemplation, watching Steve. He smiled and offered his hand.

"Now?" she asked a bit hesitant. When he nodded with a grin, she looked down and then looked around her apartment. "But my clothes--"

"Your clothes are fine. You look great. Motor Head's totally appropriate for the occasion. It's just a date" Steve said, but laid on that charming big smile even brighter. He reached out and took her hand. "Come on. "

She allowed herself to be pulled out from the door and down the stairs. Steve never let go of her hand until he opened up the car door for her. She caught Dustin, now joined by Claudia, grinning and peeking out the living room window as they backed down the driveway. Before she realized it, he was whisking her away to the little pizza place in town. There were a few cozy booths at Surfer Boy Pizza, and a few tables. Steve grabbed the corner booth, well out of

the way of most foot traffic and they sat and talked before the waitress came to get their order.

Waiting on the pizza, Steve leaned back against the booth and played with the straw in his drink. "I wanted to say I'm sorry again. I should have called."

"No, really. Its ok. And you don't have to keep beating yourself up about it. Let's just, you know, have a good time, right? Like after the party? That ended up being fun, just driving around talking half the night." Heather smiled at him.

"It was. I mean what's not to enjoy, spending my time with such a pretty girl" Steve said, causing her to blush and study the table in front of her and it was her turn to fiddle with her straw for a while.

"I mean... don't sell yourself short, Harrington. You're pretty enjoyable to be around" she admitted, a smile turning at the corners of her lips, though she was trying to look cool. Steve scoffed lightly but didn't really have an answer for that.

"So, if I'm so enjoyable to be around... how come I haven't seen much of you around town? You don't just go to work and go home?" he asked.

"Most of the time. I mean, I hang out and kinda watch after my cousin and his friends a lot. When my aunt's at work, I like helping her out." Heather told him.

"What I'm hearing is I know a girl who needs to get out more and have some fun. Maybe with the guy sitting next to her" Steve slid around the booth with a grin and put his arm around her. This did put a grin on her face, and she giggled.

"Are you saying I'm no fun, Steve Harrington?"

"Not at all. I'd never say that. I'd say you're sweet, I'd say you're pretty, never boring" he nearly whispered against her ear. She shifted to move so she was face to face with him.

"You're quite the charmer, you know" she told him.

“Is it working?” he asked, drawing his face closer still. Not giving her time to answer, he tilted his head and gave her a soft kiss that she found herself returning. Steve’s arms moved around her lower back, his hands pulling her toward him as his kiss continued, still soft and sweet, but darting his tongue out to taste her lips. Instinctively, her right hand moved up to the hair at the back of his neck, nestling her fingers in his thick mane. Just as the two were surfacing for some air, the waitress came over, trying to set their pizza down and make an escape. Laughing at getting caught, the two sat back up straight and took deep breaths. Steve did the honours serving up the pizza.

~*~

The sun was starting to set, and Steve pulled his car up to a clearing on the cliffs overlooking the lake in the quarry. Trees moved toward them on both sides of the car. Despite it being just off the main road, it was rather secluded feeling, she had to admit. Turning the engine off, Steve turned toward her and smiled. “See, one sunset at the lake, coming up” he said cheerfully. Heather smiled, but narrowed her eyes slightly at him.

“I thought I recognized where we were headed. Don’t think for one second that I’m that kind of girl, Steve Harrington!” she laughed, lightly poking him in the chest. Steve feigned a hurt look. And clutched at his chest where she had lightly jabbed him.

“Never! Really though. I just wanted to spend more time with you, and see if there was a chance maybe you’d consider a second date for our future” he confessed. Heather raised her eyebrows in surprise, but already a smile was creeping to the corners of her mouth. Steve got out and stretched, moving to open her door. He sat down on the hood of his car and patted the spot next to him. “Best seats in the house” he said. She smiled and climbed up next to him. They relaxed against his windshield, and sat in silence for a few minutes, taking in the sounds around them of the breeze in the trees.

“So why Hawkins?” Steve asked, finally breaking the silence.

“Excuse me?”

“Why Hawkins?” Steve asked again. He looked over her way and looked over her face. “You obviously aren’t from here. You aren’t that much older than me. I’m sure I would have remembered you from school, even being older.”

“Well, I moved here after I graduated. I came from Williamsport.”

“Williamsport? That place has so much more going on than Hawkins. Really, why downgrade?” he asked, genuinely sounding curious now. Heather took a deep breath.

“Well...” she picked her words a bit carefully. “I.. just needed a change, ya know? My parents... mostly my dad... he uh... he had a pretty strong belief in God and well... once he found out Daddy’s little girl listened to Satan’s music... Well... that was the beginning of the end.” Heather told him.

“Your dad didn’t want you around because you like rock music?” Steve sounded confused.

“I mean, that sorta just opened his eyes to how evil I truly was, he said. See, my dad is the head of his church and his followers and him, they’re all really devout people. I mean they live for Jesus.” She told him.

“Yeah but...” Steve got quiet. “I mean that sounds like a cult in the making.” He said softly. Heather shrugged.

“Well, my aunt Claudia knew I wasn’t doing well in that situation, I think. She reached out and offered me this great little apartment for rent. I packed up my stuff and never looked back. So, I mean, things are great now. My apartment’s bad ass. I got my job, and I got a car. My cousin Dustin is seriously the best kid in the world. Seriously. That kid’s so smart.” She trailed off with a smile.

“You met a pretty great guy” Steve said, moving his hand to lace fingers with hers as they watched the sun move down toward the water on the lake.

“Two of them, in fact” Heather said, smiling. Steve turned his head to

look questioningly at her at first, and then his lip twitched with disapproval.

“Well. Okay I guess two. Let’s just focus on this one tonight” he said softly, and she nodded in agreement. Steve brought their entwined fingers up to his mouth to kiss the back of her hand. They ended up talking a lot about Steve’s life in Hawkins. How his own dad was an asshole, but generally left him alone, free to do as he pleased. He was on the Hawkins High basketball team and would be graduating that year. He figured he may end up just working for his dad, but he wasn’t really sure.

The sun had long set, and the moon had risen. They found themselves looking up at the stars. Steve had given her his jacket when she started shivering with the chill November air. It had been unseasonably warm, but the nights were turning colder. Wrapped in Steve’s jacket, she lay back on the windshield of the car and Steve put his arm around her, nestling her against him.

“You know. I gotta say, this really has been a nice night.” Heather admitted, her dark eyes shining with the moonlight as she watched the stars above.

“It has. But I knew it would be.” Steve told her. He was studying her face, while she studied the night sky. She turned to look his way and caught him staring at her and gave him a shy grin. Steve moved closer, cupping her cheek in his hand, his fingers wrapping around the back of her neck, cradling it as he brought her closer toward his face. Their lips met again. Softly, gently. Steve brought his other hand up to the other side of her face, holding her to him. Her hands on his chest, one hand moved around behind his back to hold him to her. Their kisses heating up, they broke apart to fight for air and Heather looked up into Steve’s eyes.

“Steve. I’m not-“

“I know. I really didn’t bring you here for that. You’re so beautiful though.” He added, stroking her cheek and smiling at the blush he caused her. “We’ll get there in time” he said, a confidence in his voice that she couldn’t deny she found sexy. “Let’s get you home” he said, softly.

Getting back into the older BMW, Steve brought the engine to life, and turned the heat up. After the fog had cleared from the windows, he backed to the main road, and headed toward her place. Reaching his hand over, he once more twined his fingers up in hers, looking to her as if silently asking if it was ok before returning his eyes to the road. They drove along in a comfortable silence, Steve's hand keeping hers warm. That warmth spread through her, and she knew she had a smile spreading across her face, as well.

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Pulling up to the curb beside the Henderson's garage, Steve turned to her. "It was seriously a really great night. I'm so glad you decided to give me a shot. I really like you, Heather."

"I really like you, too Steve. I'm glad you wanted to take me out." She smiled.

"I know you wanna get going... I promise. I PROMISE I'll call you, okay? No more ditching you and being a bitch. I swear."

"Steve. No more beating yourself up over it." She said. She started to unzip his jacket.

"Keep it. I'll get it later" he said, leaning over to kiss her again.

"Ok. I-I'm gonna go .. before I stay" she warned with a smile. Steve grinned, but he nodded.

"Goodnight then"

"Goodnight" she said and quickly made her exit from the car before he could offer to walk her upstairs, or keep her there. Her heart was pounding, the butterflies were still making some rounds in her stomach. Making her way up the old, wooden stairway, she noted that he made sure she got inside, and she waved before he finally pulled away.

Closing the door behind her, she kicked off her sneakers and reached to flip her light switch on. A voice came from a corner of the room that the moonlight wasn't touching.

"Wait, Heather, don't!"

Heather screamed. The voice screamed. A third scream sounded, something unhuman. Making Heather scream again. Dustin's face appeared in the shaft of moonlight as he leaned down from his seat on her bed, looking at the source of the third, other-worldly scream.

"Dustin!" Heather thought her heart was going to jump straight out of her chest. She realized she was trembling, and her breath was coming in hard pants. "Jeez, you scared me out of my mind! What are you doing here in the dark in my apartment??" she asked, trying to catch her breath and steady herself. "What's wrong? What's going on?" her protective instincts overpowered the fear and she moved toward him.

"Wait! Hold on!" he said, stopping her in her tracks. Then, she heard it. From the floor in front of him, the direction of that third screech, came the small panting noise that slowly turned into almost a purr as she got closer. It was Dart. Her eyes strained to try and make out the shape of the little creature in the dark, but she couldn't.

"Dustin... Is that Dart? Let me turn a light on" she said softly.

"I didn't want to scare him. Here." he said, leaning over and turning on a much dimmer lamp on her small bedside table. Heather gasped. Dart was twice the size he was when she left with Steve.

"Dustin! What the HELL?" she asked, surprised, but in a hushed tone.

"I know! He molted! His skin was in the tank and... and he was bigger!" Heather nodded in understanding. She took a deep breath, processing this new change. The little creature sat on it's haunches and raised a back leg, scratching above it's front shoulder where she imagined an ear of some sort might be.

"Okay... okay. Well. What is dart doing up in my apartment? It's gotta be almost midnight?"

“Yeah were you out with Steve Harrington this late? Was it a date? Is Steve your boyfriend now?” Dustin questioned her.

“One thing at a time, kiddo. What’s Dart doing here? What are you doing here?” she shook her head at his subject jump.

“I think he missed you. I think he could smell you or something, like he knew you would be here. We’ve been here for like an hour, after he escaped the tank, I followed him here.” Dustin said, a smile on his face. “He’s really smart!”

“And that’s a little scary, kiddo.” She admitted. “He’s escaping his tank, that’s a problem. He’s twice as big as he was this afternoon. That could be a problem, too. Dustin...” she said, softly. She didn’t want to break his heart and tell him they had to do something with Dart.

Just then, the purring increased. Dart raised up and softly padded toward her. Dustin watched on, awe on his face, and Heather watched as well, unsure what she was feeling, at that moment. Dart came to a stop at her feet, and within seconds, the creature had started nuzzling his body against her legs. Purring away, he seemed to be trying to cuddle with her. Her expression softened as her brown eyes looked down at him. With Dustin still looking on in amazement, Heather slowly crouched down, and put her hands on Dart’s back. He reacted by nuzzling against her touch, almost pushing himself into her hands. His skin was cool to the touch. She had never felt anything like him. Before she knew what she was doing, she had lifted the creature up slowly. Looking for his reaction as she brought him up, Dart just seemed to want to snuggle against her when she had fully brought him up into her arms. She could hear him purring again, louder this time.

“See? He missed you! He REALLY likes you!” Dustin said, happily. Heather had to admit, her heart was softening for this little guy. She cradled him and watched him nuzzle against her. Sitting down on her bed beside Dustin, Heather stroked Dart’s back and gently rocked him. The two sat in silence for a while, just watching the mysterious creature. The purring softened, and soon after, Dart seemed to be breathing deeply. “I think he might be asleep. Maybe he thinks you’re his mommy” Dustin said, his voice just over a whisper.

"I mean... he's pretty cute." She had to admit. "How about he stays here tonight? Maybe he outgrew the tank. But, Dustin. Tomorrow we need to figure out what to do with him. Especially if he keeps growing." Dustin nodded in agreement.

"Is that Steve's jacket?" he asked, off topic. Heather pursed her lips and shot him a look.

"Go on and go to bed before Aunt Claudia finds you out at midnight. Dart will be fine." She said softly. Gently, she laid the sleeping creature on one of her pillows and walked Dustin to the door. After he was on his way back to his own house, she went to quickly change, pausing with a smile to note that the jacket smelled like Steve's cologne. Changing into an old, oversized KISS t shirt, she thanked her lucky stars that she didn't have to work the next day, turned the light off, and slowly and softly climbed into bed near the creature sleeping blissfully on her pillow.

"Maybe you can help me figure out this whole Hopper and Steve situation, little guy. Wanna be my advisor?" she whispered, smiling as she drifted off as well.

5. The Prince and the Princess

The next morning, Heather stretched lazily in her sleep. Eyes still closed, she was just starting to wake, shaking the dream world away and realizing the late morning sun was shining through the thin curtains of her small apartment. Loving the warm nest she had burrowed into in her sleep, the events from last night started floating back to her. Thoughts of Steve Harrington flashed passed and everything came to a grinding halt when she remembered Dart sleeping next to her, snoozing on her pillow as she drifted off to sleep last night. Her dark brown eyes shot open, losing all sleepiness immediately. Her head turned to see only the indent of where the creature had once been. Sitting up swiftly, she threw her blankets off, and her feet were on the floor in a flash.

Heather crouched to look under her bed but came up empty handed. The small apartment didn't have too many hiding places, which now came as a blessing. She furrowed a brow, and called out softly "Dart? Where are you? Come on out, it's just me." Of course, he couldn't understand her, she scolded herself. Searching behind the big, overstuffed armchair she had, and moving to the bathroom to look, she changed into a Depeche Mode t shirt and an old pair of faded jeans with holes in the knees. Pulling on an old, ratty black hoodie for the chilly November day, she was just opening her door when Dustin came bounding up the stairs, looking panicked and winded.

"Heather! Heather! Heather! Oh my God. Thank God you're ok!" he said, leaning on the railing, trying to catch his breath. Heather reached out to steady him, looking worried.

"Of course, I'm alright. Why wouldn't I be?" Her face blanked in a panic of her own. "Dustin. Where's Dart?"

"I- I had to... He's... He's in the storm cellar." Dustin motioned toward the side of his house where the heavy metal doors sported a chain and padlock along with the big bolt lock that was always on the doors.

"Why? What happened?" Heather asked, worry in her voice.

“He ate Mews, Heather!” Dustin’s voice conveying the horror that he was reliving, of finding his mom’s cat, being eaten by Dart earlier in the day. Heather’s face drained of colour.

“What?” she asked.

“He ate my mom’s cat! Jesus, you said to let you know if he did anything weird. This morning I woke up and he was back in my room, and he was eating mews! Oh my God, his face opened up like one of those...”

“Demogorgons?” Heather asked with horror. Dustin nodded and she protectively hugged him against her, staring at the storm cellar doors. “You should have gotten me, I could have helped you, kiddo.” She said. “Where’s Aunt Claudia?” she asked, as the realization that her aunt can’t find out, and needed to be kept safe, hit her.

“I sent her on a wild goose chase looking across town for Mews.” Dustin told her. Heather cast him a disapproving look, so he shot back at her “What was I supposed to do? She can’t be here!”

“I know, I know. You did the right thing. What do we do now, kiddo?” Heather asked, as they walked down the stairs, glancing over their shoulders to keep an eye on those big metal doors. Heather was so distracted, she bumped into someone at the bottom of her stairs.

“Woah, woah. Good morning to you too” Steve smiled.

“Steve!” she gasped, her stomach dropping. He couldn’t be here. Not now. What if he got hurt, or scared to come near her after this? Her thoughts were interrupted by her cousin’s voice.

“Steve! Do you still have your bat? With all the nails in it that you used on the Demogorgan?”

“Wait- Steve? You knew? Dustin?” Heather was so confused.

“I’m sorry. It didn’t come up. You didn’t even know him until last month.” Dustin told her. “We don’t have time for this! Do you have it, Steve?”

“Yeah man, why? What’s going on?” Steve asked, as confused as

Heather was. Dustin gave him a run down as fast as he could while the three walked over to Steve's car. He popped the trunk and produced the bat Dustin had asked about.

"You keep it in your car?" Dustin asked him. Steve shrugged.

"You never know when you'll need it- Hey! You need it, don't you?" Steve asked defensively. Sighing, Dustin grabbed up his hockey stick that he had dropped while running up Heather's stairs. The three made their way to the storm cellar doors. Dustin started unlocking the chains, and Steve looked over to Heather. "I uh, wanted to stop by and ask if I could take you to lunch... I had a great time last night."

"Aww I really did too. That would have been so nice" Heather smiled up at him, making a grin spread over his handsome face.

"Guys! Seriously! Not now?" Dustin interrupted, pulling the padlock and chain loose, and getting ready to pull the heavy bolt.

"Oh my God, poor Dart" Heather said, her voice shaking a little, as Steve readied his bat. "I can't believe... I can't watch this" she said softly. Dustin looked at her with pity.

"I know he means a lot to you, too. But this Dart ate my mom's cat, Heather. Remember that." He said, sternly, laying a supportive hand on her shoulder. Heather pursed her lips, sighed, and nodded. Taking a shaky breath, she motioned for him to go ahead. Dustin pulled the heavy metal doors open, and Steve moved to the entrance. Looking down, he readied his bat as he peered into the darkness.

"You guys stay up here. I'll take care of this." He told them.

"Be careful, Steve." Heather said as he slowly made his way down the old concrete stairs. A few minutes of silence seemed like ages to Heather. She looked to Dustin, worry written across her face. Both of them tried looking down into the darkness, but they couldn't see or hear anything from Steve or Dart. Finally, a shout came from the darkness.

"Uh guys! You maybe better come down here." Steve called. The

cousins looked puzzled at each other and rushed down into the storm cellar with him. Heather gasped, as Steve held up the bat, hammered with nails spiking out of it, to show them a slimy outer layer of skin. Dart had shed yet again.

“He’s bigger still now.” Heather said quietly. Her brown eyes widened. “Holy shit!” she said, and walked past Steve, drawing his and Dustin’s attention to where she was staring. There was a giant hole knocked through the wall. Dart had torn through a wall of concrete, and burrowed a tunnel, or so it appeared. Heather’s stomach felt like it was tied in a knot. “He could literally be anywhere now.”

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They stood outside, staring at the now closed storm cellar doors. Heather’s arms were folded, her brow creased. She was worried. She had to keep Dustin safe, but a little part of her was worried about Dart. What was going on? Was this awful, evil thing from their nightmares back again? Was Dart really a part of it? What happened when they found him, if they found him? And what was he out there doing right now? She looked over to Dustin, who also seemed lost in thought. He was such a tough kid. She couldn’t believe how well he was actually taking all of this. She knew that if Claudia knew about any of this, she would also be so proud of him... after being horrified and in shock.

“So... what do you guys want to do?” Steve’s voice broke through her train of thought, snapping her back to reality. She knew she had to have a clear head and think logically now. Feelings aside for that weird little creature, she loved her cousin and she had to protect him and all the kids, Steve, and frankly, all of Hawkins, if Dart was a part of this awful creature’s world.

“We lure him. The tunnel goes that way, right?” Dustin said, pointing off to the west. “I lured him to the storm cellar with bologna. Let’s cut up some meat and make him a trail.”

“The old junk yard is over that way. If we could lure him there, maybe we could trap him.” Heather said.

“Trap him? You mean kill him?” Steve said, not picking up as Dustin tried to frantically quiet him with a silent slashing motion. Heather took a deep breath but didn’t answer him. Steve’s brow furrowed. “You don’t want us to kill him, do you? Why?”

“I don’t- I mean, I just...” Heather trailed off softly.

“Dart thinks Heather’s his mom. They bonded, Steve.” Dustin told him. Heather kept her eyes on the ground and shook her head.

“It’s stupid. He ate Aunt Claudia’s cat. He’s obviously dangerous.” She said, but the quiver in her voice betrayed her, despite her best efforts. Steve sighed. Handing the bat silently over to Dustin, he stepped fully in front of Heather and tilted his head, studying her a minute before bringing her in for a hug and holding her against him. He reached up and tilted her chin upward, until their eyes met.

“Hey.” He said softly. “Look, it’s not stupid. You care for this thing. I don’t get it, but you do. But I know you love this kid here, and we can’t let anything happen to him. If you were messed up with that thing last year, you know how nasty they can be, right?” Sniffing lightly, Heather nodded. “Let’s find your little monster, ok? You don’t have to do anything, I’ll take care of it.” Steve said softly. He kissed her cheek tenderly as a tear escaped and ran rogue.

“Guys...” Dustin interrupted, motioning for them to get moving. With a sigh, Heather nodded and the three moved toward Steve’s car. As they were collecting the supplies they were going to need, Dustin got ahold of Lucas on his walkie talkie headset and told him to meet them at the junk yard.

Soon enough, Dustin, Steve and Heather were making their way through the woods, down an old set of train tracks, headed toward the old junk yard. They walked in silence for a bit, until Steve started asking about Dustin’s motives for keeping Dart around to begin with. As Dustin started explaining that he wanted to impress Max, Heather listened while the two conversed about this new love of Dustin’s life. Steve offered up some advice to him.

Heather smiled at Steve, lost in thought a bit, thinking how maybe having actual guy advice would be good for the kiddo. She loved how

Steve seemed to take to Dustin. Glad for the distraction of the happier conversation, she blushed when she realized Steve had been looking over at her and caught her watching him with a starry eyed, dopey grin on her face. Luckily, Lucas and Max finding them along the tracks was a welcome distraction.

Soon they had made their way to the junk yard and were relieved to see the old bus was still there, and still in good enough shape to be fortified for their purposes. As they set about dragging sheets of metal, salvaged pieces of cars, and anything else they could find to drag to the bus, Heather took a second to introduce herself to Max.

“I’m assuming you’re Max. I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Dustin’s cousin, Heather” she smiled. Max gave her a small curve of a smile.

“I’ve heard a lot about you too. Dustin says you’re pretty cool. Actually, all the guys in their club think you’re pretty neat.” Max told her and moved off to grab some more pieces of metal to salvage. Heather paused for a second. Her heart melted a little. She often had baby sat the group of kids that Dustin was friends with, she had even let them hang out in her apartment to escape from reality, or to host a killer game of Dungeons and Dragons, which she occasionally even joined them for. And even though they were kids, she felt so happy they all seemed to like her so much. As Steve moved past her, dragging a piece of metal, she took up the other side and helped him get it onto the bus.

Soon, the sun started to go down, and they stood outside the bus, examining their work. Steve circled the perimeter, knocking and pushing anywhere he thought there could be a weak spot. Finally, satisfied with the results, he waved toward the bus doors. “Ok let’s go, you guys! We’re gonna be sitting ducks out here in the dark” he told them. Ushering the kids on the bus, Heather tried bringing up the rear, but Steve made her get in before he got on and closed up the doors tightly. “Now, we wait.” Steve sighed, taking a seat against a wall of the bus. Heather sat next to him. Max sat across from them, and Lucas went up to the roof of the bus on a ladder they had fixed inside, to be a look out, leaving Dustin to pace nervously.

Steve reached out and took Heather’s hand, his thumb gently stroking the top of her hand. She smiled up at him, and then leaned her head

on his shoulder. As they waited, they found out that Lucas had filled Max in on everything that had happened last year, with the kids' friend Will disappearing, their new friend El showing up, even the Demogorgon attacking. And Max, naturally, had questions.

"So, you fought stuff like this before?" she asked, softly. Steve nodded. "And you're sure it was a monster? I mean, like it wasn't a bear or anything?" Steve was just about to answer, when he got cut off by Dustin.

"Really a bear? Look, if you're gonna be an idiot, go home already." Dustin told her, angrily. Heather raised her head, her mouth open wide in disbelief. Max scoffed and got up, moving to the ladder to go sit with Lucas on the roof.

"Dustin!" Heather said, her voice a scolding whisper. "What's gotten into you?" she asked.

"It's how you get some girls. Show them you don't care." Steve said, winking at Dustin. Heather raised her head higher, to cast a raised eyebrow at him.

"Why are you winking, Steve? Stop that. I'm not acting." Dustin told him, grumpily. Heather shook her head at her cousin. Now wasn't the time to prod him, but she suspected Dustin wasn't the only one in their group who had a crush on this new girl. She'd ask him later, after this was over and they could breathe again.

"I mean, I'd never do that to you" Steve finished, an apologetic look on his face. Heather laughed at his reaction to her eyebrow and punched his shoulder lightly.

"You're an idiot, Steve Harrington" Heather laughed teasingly.

"At least I'm a cute idiot, right?" Steve asked with a patented, charming Steve Harrington grin. Bringing another giggle from Heather, he leaned over for a quick kiss, which she happily gave him. Just as Dustin was rolling his eyes, a yell from Lucas, above them, indicated that they had a visitor. Raising to the crack in the fortified windows, they peered out and watched a four-legged figure appear out of the darkness.

"It's Dart!" Heather breathed. They watched as he got closer to the stack of meat, they had set up close to the bus. A trail of gasoline led from it, with Steve at the ready with his zippo. The creature was again doubled in size from the last time Dustin had seen him. He was now nearly the size of a small bear, making Max's questioning seem not nearly as stupid anymore. Dart padded closer, but still didn't get close enough.

"Why isn't he eating it?" Dustin asked. Heather shrugged, her dark eyes on the creature who had been asleep next to her less than twenty-four hours before. "You don't think he knows you're here, do you?" Dustin asked his cousin.

"No, how could he?" Steve answered. "Maybe he's tired of cow." Steve unzipped his hoodie, slipping it off and draping it on a bus seat.

"What are you doing?" Dustin asked, as Heather realized what was going on. She grabbed Steve's arm, pulling him back from stepping to the doors.

"No, Steve. You can't go out there!" she said, fear in her eyes. She refused to let go of his wrist. Steve sighed, and looked into her eyes. His hand came up to her cheek.

"He's not going for the cow, Heather. I need to protect these kids, and you." He said softly.

"No! I can help. Let me go." She cried.

"I can't let you do that." Steve told her. "Dustin would never forgive me. He needs you. Hopper might kill me." He said, flatly. She stubbornly held on to his arm. Shaking her head.

"There must be some other way. He trusts me. Maybe I can--"

"Heather. No. No way." Steve was firm, cutting her off when he realized where she was going with that line. His thumb stroked her cheek, softly. "Let the prince save his princess, would you?" he asked softly, wiping a tear from her cheek. She scoffed lightly at the thought that he would call her a princess.

"Promise you'll come back" she whispered.

"I promise." He swore. Tossing his lighter to Dustin, he said "You do it kid. Be ready." Giving Heather a long kiss, he pushed the door open to the bus and jumped outside. With a sob, Heather swung the door closed behind him. She knew that no matter what, these kids had to be her top priority now. But her eyes stayed glued to the scene before her. Dart raised his head toward the sound of Steve approaching.

Steve taunted the creature, trying to bring him forward. Heather held her breath, silently praying Dart would just run off into the distance, never to be seen again. Steve would be ok, and so would Dart. She dared to hope. Biting at her lower lip, watching nervously, until she heard Lucas scream a warning from his lookout spot above them. "Steve! Three o'clock! There's another one! Steve!" Heather rushed forward to look out at a wider angle. Sure enough, there was another creature. As Steve slowly turned, a third appeared, and a fourth. Heather swung the door open and screamed with the kids for him to come back. He barely beat the charging beasts to the bus. Heather got the door nearly pushed shut, and Dustin threw himself against her, adding force to the lever to get it closed the last few inches, just as the creature reared back to push its way through the opening.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god" she whispered, hugging Steve tightly.

"They can't get in... right?" Max asked. Almost in answer, the creatures started slamming against the bus. Marks from their claws ran down the metal. The panicked kids all screamed. Heather's skin crawled, her heart raced. She felt Steve grip her hand tightly and knew he was just as worried, as the bus walls threatened to give way with each attack.

"No way. They can't get in" Dustin sounded like he was trying to assure himself just as much as Max. "No way." He said again. After a few minutes, the attacks did slow and then die off. Just as they dared to separate from the huddle they were in, in the centre of the bus, a giant thud sounded from the roof. Their eyes all darted up to the open hatch as they realized in horror that one of them was on the roof. Heaving footsteps creaked across the ceiling of the metal roof, until the face of the monstrous creature was peering into the bus from above. It opened its mouth, which was its entire face, formed of five petals covered in teeth to roar at its prey. At the bottom of the

ladder, Max screamed in horror. Heather reached out and pulled the girl back, hugging her to her tightly. The creature veered its head out again to roar, and leaned down the opening. Steve pushed between the girls and the ladder, his bat full of nails raised up.

“Come on, asshole! You wanna go? Gonna have to get through me!” he screamed, swinging the bat, keeping the monster at bay. Heather kept ahold of Max, who was still trembling, staring up at the creature. Suddenly, the monster stopped its advances. It reared its head up into the air, almost as if it were listening to something. Screeching upward, and ignoring them now completely, it turned, and ran off the side of the bus, retreating. Eyes wide, mouths hanging open, the kids joined Steve and Heather moving to the windows to look out, watching the herd follow suit, retreating off into the darkness.

“Where are they going?” Max asked. “Did we scare them off?”

“No way. They got called somewhere. Did you see that thing look like it was listening to someone?” Steve asked. “Come on, let’s go.” He finished, grabbing Heather’s hand, leading her off the bus. The kids followed behind.

They started down the tracks again, in the direction the pack had ran. Guided by the moonlight and two small flashlights that Dustin and Lucas had came prepared with. The three kids trailed a short distance behind, talking amongst themselves. Steve and Heather walked ahead, still holding hands.

“Well, not really the way I planned our second date would go. But at least we got the moonlit stroll.” Steve joked, smiling at her. She chuckled and looked up at him.

“I mean, as far as Hawkins goes, it may be a pretty normal date” she said. “Your princess is pleased.” She teased him. Steve looked bashful.

“Yeah... I don’t know why I said that. I don’t think you’re probably the princess type, honestly. You seem like you can be pretty bad ass, actually.” He admitted.

“No, it was cute. I mean, there must be some bad ass princesses out there somewhere, right? And they need equally bad ass princes, I would guess.” She mused. Steve’s smiled at her, and they moved on in silence for a while.

A rustle in the branches made them all stop short, but a more distant howl made them turn in horror. They found themselves looking down a slope, toward the outskirts of town. Still lined with trees, but lights dotted the distance. More howls joined the first. They were inhuman, to say the least, neither any man nor beast Heather had ever heard... except for one.

Lucas raised his binoculars up, searching for the source of the howling, amongst the lights. They all tried to focus their senses, hearing and sight, straining to make out the focal point. Slowly, Lucas lowered the binoculars and stared with them.

“It’s the lab. They went to the lab.” He said, softly, as they watched lights start to flicker. They all knew they had to start heading down the slope, and Steve started them off, tugging at Heather, his hand still gripping hers.

6. A Gentleman's Duel?

Making their way down the hill side, the group stumbled their way along. Steve gripped Heather's hand keeping her close, his bat held tightly in the other hand. Dustin, Lucas and Max came awkwardly behind them, arguing amongst themselves about the best way to get inside the lab. As things heated up, Heather looked back to them with a serious look on her face.

"Guys, let's figure it out when we get there, huh?" she asked. The three cast her grumpy looks but agreed. "Maybe we'll get there, and the lab guards will have, you know... fixed everything." Heather finished. She knew as she said it, that her own wavery voice gave away her doubtfulness on that. The flickering lights and demonic sounds grew closer as they found their footing easier and swiftly moved down the sloping grassy land. Picking their way through the trees, they approached the edge of the woods when they heard voices. Heather motioned for the kids to stop, and she and Steve took a few cautious steps forward toward the sound of the voices. Nearly blinded by car lights, they let their hands part, to guard their eyes. The voices halted momentarily.

"Steve?" came a voice from the other side of the lights. Steve squinted and strained to see until the lights cut out, leaving them again in moonlight. Before them, parked at the guard booth to the lab entrance, was Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers, who had just turned the lights off to his car. "What are you doing here?" Nancy asked, her eyes moving to Heather, who came up beside Steve as they started walking forward. Dustin, Lucas and Max all followed suit and came out from the trees as well.

"It's a long story, really. But we gotta get into that lab." Steve told her.

"Yeah, that's a problem." Jonathan said, from inside the abandoned guard post. Flipping the switches inside on the panel, he showed them what he meant. "No power, no gates."

"Great. Well..." Heather looked around at their situation. She studied the gate, and her left hand went absently to the back of her neck,

running her fingers through the hair at the back of her head as she thought what their next move could be.

“Is that Dustin’s cousin?” Nancy asked Steve in a lowered tone, as the kids started arguing again, trying to come up with a plan. He gave her a questioning look, and suddenly they all stopped what they were doing to stare at the lab again. The power had come back on. Jonathan and Dustin both scrambled to find the switches in the booth to open the gates. Both fighting for room, unable to agree on which buttons did what. Just as Heather was about to pull them both out of there, the gates opened slowly.

They all heard a loud scream, this time very human sounding, and much closer than the previous screeches had seemed. As the gates fully opened, Steve and Heather huddled with Jonathan and Nancy. “Ok look. Nancy and me, we’ll take my car and drive to the doors. Someone’s close, by the sound of it.” Jonathan told them.

“I don’t know, man. We followed those things here. Maybe Heather and I should go, too. We know what those things are now. We know what we’re dealing with.” Steve told them.

“We don’t have time for this! My brother is in there with Will and his mom!” Nancy interrupted, her voice panicked. “We’ll go. I don’t care what’s in there!” She told them as she opened the passenger door to Jonathan’s car. Jonathan climbed into the driver’s seat while Steve and Heather tried to warn them.

“But Dart’s in there.” Heather said, sounding frantic, as the car sped down the entrance drive. Steve pulled her close to him and she struggled back to look up at him. “We should go after them” she said softly.

“And what? What will that solve? We don’t have a car, and we’re not all fitting in there if those dogs get loose, Heather. What are you hoping for here?” he asked her, softly, his brown eyes searching hers.

“I- Maybe I could ...” she sighed. “He could- He might listen to me” she said, her eyes tearing up.

“Heather. No. No way. Ok, look. Even if Dart listened. There were at

least what, four more of those things? The odds aren't good there." Steve started. Before he could finish, another scream came from the lab. This one even closer. A scream of pain. A scream of anguish. The group's full attention came to rest on the lab as Max pointed toward movement at the lab doors.

Just as Jonathan's car pulled up, the front doors burst open, and Mike Wheeler came running out. He was followed soon after by a figure Heather didn't recognize, at first. She squinted, trying to focus. As Nancy and Jonathan got out, Mike climbed in, and it soon became apparent that the shadowed figure was multiple people. A taller figure was actually carrying two people. Placing Will into the car, and then pulling someone who must have been Joyce Byers back to the car, the figure struggled to keep Joyce outside the building. Why was she fighting so hard to get back inside the lab?

Finally, winning the struggle and getting Joyce into the car, the figure's long strides took them toward a group of parked cars near the entrance. Easily, they climbed into a very familiar Hawkins Police Blazer. Heather's jaw dropped, as her heart seemed to rise into her throat. She stared, open mouthed, in disbelief. Chief Jim Hopper was here? Involved in all of this the whole time, and she had never known? She had just been on a date with this man, having the most magical time of her life, eating dinner across from him, and they hadn't even known the other was caught up in all of this madness?

Her mind was still reeling as Jonathan sped by them. Seconds later, the Blazer came to a screeching halt beside them. Jim leaned over, pushing the passenger door open as he yelled toward their group "Come on! Get in- "he started, but he stopped short as his eyes fell on Heather. As his blue eyes met her dark ones, his mouth hung open slightly, matching her shocked look as he stared back at her.

As Lucas, Max and Dustin scrambled into the Blazer's backseat, a moment of silent understanding passed between the two of them. Both Hopper and Heather realized this was it. They were both wrapped up in this. They never had to keep secrets from one another now. Never had to dance around anything, avoiding topics, and certain truths, skirting details. As a slow smile of realization spread across both of their faces, Steve reached out and tugged at Heather's hand before climbing into the back with Dustin.

Heather climbed into the passenger seat, and swung the door closed. As Jim stepped on the gas, he kept stealing glances from the road, over to her. The corners of his lips twitched in the same smile that he last had when he left the Fair Mart after asking her on their second date. “Well, fancy meeting you here, Rocker Girl.” Hopper smirked softly, keeping his hands on the wheel, but his attention still split between his driving and the girl next to him. Heather felt her cheeks growing warm already, and her head lowered slightly, a smile curling the corners of her mouth, too.

“I could say the same, Chief Hopper.” she told him. Jim’s smile widened a little with the chuckle this brought. From the backseat, Dustin furrowed his brow and glanced at the two of them, watching his cousin’s interaction with Hopper. Glancing at Steve, he looked as unamused as Steve was feeling.

“Well, this isn’t awkward at all.” Dustin said, a note of sarcasm in his voice. Steve glanced at him with a look of understanding but said nothing in return. The ride back to the Byers house was oddly quiet.

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After they got to Joyce’s house, they found the woman in a state of shock. The others found out that the horribly anguished screams coming from the lab before their escape, had been from Joyce’s boyfriend, Bob. The group of demodogs had hunted him, and the pack had attacked just as he had made his way to the lab doors. He was just behind Joyce and the others, about to escape to freedom, when they got him, and she had to watch him get murdered. That was why she had been trying to get back inside, to him. Heather had only really known Bob as ‘the guy from Radio Shack’ but she wasn’t about to say that here and now. She pitied Joyce, and felt her heart breaking for the woman. Leading Joyce off to her bedroom, Heather wrapped her in a thick blanket, trying to make her comfortable, and listen to her sobs. She sat with the older woman and hugged her tightly.

"I'm so sorry, Joyce. Shhhh. I know Bob was a really special guy, I know he was. I'm so sorry." She said, soothingly. She sat with Joyce, listening to her talk about Bob and just gave the woman time to grieve to a willing listener. Hearing bits of the conversations from the other room come muffled down the hallway, she could only make out bits and pieces of what the others were talking about.

"So, are you and Dustin's cousin a thing now?" Nancy had quietly asked Steve, as they stood in one corner of the Byer's kitchen. Steve, leaning back against the kitchen counter looked at Nancy and gave a little half shrug, half nod.

"We might be" Steve said, his arms crossed over his chest, slightly. He was very aware that several heads had turned his way, curious to his answers. Jim Hopper hadn't moved. He leaned against the counter adjacent to Steve, his head tilted. If he was listening to this, or lost in thought, Steve couldn't tell at the moment. Nancy look taken aback.

"When did that happen?" she asked him, her voice still hushed, but there was a slight tensed tone that hadn't been there before. Steve shot her a frown.

"Does it matter?" he asked her. It was her turn to give a faint shrug. "You and I haven't been happy in a while, Nance. Heather, she makes me happy." He finished. A cough from Hopper drew Steve's attention.

"Yeah, she's a pretty special girl, huh Harrington?" Hopper said. His blue eyes focused on the younger guy now. Steve frowned slightly, trying to read the chief's tone.

"Hold on, just a minute now, Chief. I already know about you and her, ok?" Steve asked, meeting Jim's icy blue gaze with his own brown one. "I wasn't trying to step on your toes, but- "

"But what? You just thought it would be fine? No big deal? Finish that sentence, kid." Hopper asked, drawing himself up to his full height, instead of leaning back against the counter. Steve straightened his posture up to match Hopper's stance.

Hearing their heated tones begin, Heather had popped her head from

Joyce's bedroom just as she had gotten the older woman to lay back and try to close her eyes for a few minutes. She came out, softly closing the bedroom door behind her. Her brow furrowed, she came the few steps down the hall and turned into the kitchen to see their standoff. Coming up to the side of the two men, she looked from Hopper to Steve.

"What's going on?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing's going on. I was just telling Steve here what a great time you and I had the other night. Figured he would want to move on, since we have plans next weekend too." Hopper answered her but didn't take his eyes off of the younger man. Steve scoffed.

"Oh, I already knew about your date, chief. Figured Heather could tell you what a great time she and I had when you guys go out next week." Steve's voice was low, but there was an edge to it that Heather had only heard when he had crossed paths with Billy Hargrove before. Heather's jaw dropped. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, not only to be drawing this unwanted attention from both men, but she had noticed they were the centre of attention for the rest of the room. Even Dustin, Mike, Lucas and Max were watching to see what was going to be said next.

"You guys- "Heather began. But neither one of the guys seemed to notice her trying to stop this. Hopper closed the distance between him and Steve with a few steps. They stood face to face, the older man towering over the younger one by a good 4 or 5 inches. Steve did not back away. "Guys!" Heather tried again.

"Maybe you weren't understanding me the first time." Hopper growled. Steve didn't back down. He smirked up at Jim.

"Maybe you didn't hear me, Chief. But old age will do that to ya, right?"

"Steve!" Heather was surprised at both of them. "Both of you! Stop!" she said, trying to push between the two of them. Suddenly a fourth voice rang out from the side of the trio.

"Seriously guys? Seriously?" The three looked over to see Dustin

standing there, a look of disbelief on his face. "Knock it off! Can't either one of you see all you're doing is upsetting Heather, and looking like a couple of assholes? And really, now is not the time for any of this shit." He scolded them. All three of them looked on at him with wide eyes of surprise. "Why don't you just pick this up later... like when we're not in the middle of an attack from the mindflayer?"

"Yeah, good idea." Jim said, turning back toward Steve, but not moving. "Why don't you go have a seat on the bench, kid?" Steve stood firm.

"You first, Hop." Steve told him. Dustin rolled his eyes.

"Okay... I can see you're not going to drop it, and be the adults here... So, look." Dustin started. He moved toward the group and laid a hand on Hop's shoulder and on Steve's. "Chief, Heather had a really awesome time with you. She was telling my mom all about it. She really likes you. Like, she REALLY likes you." He told Jim. Turning his head, but not moving his hands from their shoulders, he continued. "Steve, she likes you too. The night she got home from your date, she was so freaking happy. You make her happy, too, man." Both Steve and Jim smirked at each other, but Dustin continued. "But if she likes you both, and you both like her... instead of going at it like a couple cave men, why not have a gentleman's duel?"

Squinting slightly at Dustin, the two men gave him questioning looks. "Come again?" Steve asked.

"A gentleman's duel?" Dustin asked again. "Both of you take her out, date her, let her decide. And may the best man win her heart." He said, his tone sounding as though it was crazy that the two didn't catch his drift right away. Heather put her hand over her face, wishing she could hide herself from everyone, and slightly shaking her head.

"I don't think that's how- "she started explaining to Dustin, when Steve spoke up. He spoke to Hopper, not to her or to Dustin.

"May the best man win? I'm up for a challenge, what about you, Chief?" Steve asked. Heather stood still, frozen. Her eyes shut, she

was willing herself to just disappear from the embarrassment of being such a spectacle. She was so thankful there was no other comments coming from anyone else. Dustin was trying to bring some peace the best way he knew how, and she loved him for it. But she felt like she could absolutely just curl up and die of embarrassment right now.

Hopper had been studying Steve after the younger man's offer. His blue eyes went from him, over to Heather, who had embarrassment written all over her face, and then back to his cocky adversary. "I'm pretty sure I know who's coming out of this the better man" he said, nodding. "May the best man win, kid." He said.

"Great. NOW can we shut up and focus here?" Dustin chimed in again.